

The Propaganda Campaign

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Summary: Slipspace is much more interesting out of cryo, but it's dangerous... For anyone who crosses the Spartans. It's a time of reflection for John-117 and his brothers and sisters. It's also a time for the all-important propaganda team to accost the Spartans. Rating for violence and rare language.

1. The Propaganda Campaign

Disclaimer: I don't own Halo or anything about it. Except my OC(s). Because I can. _

_This is my very first attempt at writing any fanfiction but TMNT-based! Please leave some reviews so I know how I'm doing. I have read all of the Halo books I can get my hands on (which I do believe is all but one or two), played the first two games (since I don't have an Xbox, I can't play on anything but a computer, but that is just fine with me!), and sniffed out articles on Halo Nation to expand my knowledge. However, if I do make mistakes with timeline, names, etc, PLEASE tell me and I will fix it. _

Chapter One: Propaganda Campaign

Master Chief Petty Officer John-117, Spartan II, stood rigidly at attention. He was completely still; only his eyes showed any emotion. They widened slightly, but no one could see that because of his MJOLNIR armor.

"Sir, requesting order confirmation," John said slowly.

Admiral Hood just smiled slightly; the rest of the bridge crew were snickering quietly. "Of course, Master Chief. Your orders are to report to C Deck, to Mrs. Ubrood, for a special mission to raise troop morale. You'll be stage props. Gather your fellow Spartans."

"Sir, yes, sir." John snapped off a crisp salute and clunked away, his boots thudding on the metal decks of the ship. His frame of reference â€“ the ship â€“ was inertial, but the new microgravity was affecting his walk nonetheless.

"Officer on deck!" James barked as John stepped into the Spartan's assigned quarters. For unit cohesion, and to keep their human sides less obvious to the crew, they had been assigned an entire garage for their bunks. The three Spartans in the room snapped to attention, crisply saluting their leader.

"At ease." Each of his soldiers were already out of their armor; they had just returned from the planet that was, even now, being glassed. It was a blow to all of them â€“ there had not been time to remove many of the civilians. John had personally carried a deathly pale woman aboard a Pelican that was waiting to lift off just as the glassing started.

"We have new orders. Put your armor back on. I expect you all on C Deck within fifteen." It took almost that long just to put the MJOLNIR back on, John knew â€“ especially without technician help, and all of them were in the medical bay, repairing soldiers.

"Sir, yes, sir!" His Spartans â€“ James, Linda, and Kelly â€“ snapped off salutes and hurried to get redressed. They were all looking forward to showers, and John wanted nothing more than to dump out the blood pooling in his right boot, but they had their orders.

John didn't wait for his Spartans to finish but walked down to C Deck. Raising UNSC morale was something he was accustomed to; just the sound of his voice over radios seemed to double confidence and halve casualties on their side. His others Spartans inspired soldiers as well, but John, he was told, was special. It had something to do with his "badassery," according to Cortana.

John stepped into C Deck and quickly found where he was supposed to be. A film crew was milling about, expensive-looking cameras perched on shoulders and tables. As he stepped inside, coming to attention stiffly, the whole place stilled. He had dawdled on his way, and he felt Kelly, then James, and finally Linda arrange themselves behind him, coming to attention.

Behind his helmet, John could imagine the sight they made. Over seven feet tall, all of them, clad in softly glowing green armor, splashed with alien blood, human blood, bits of brains and tissue, scratched and clawed, burnedâ€¦ They made enemies run, especially Grunts, just by appearing on the battlefield.

It was rare that John got to be around his fellow Spartans any more. They had slowly died off, listed as MIA for morale purposes. John remembered each with fondness, but also regret. It was down to half a dozen left, though they wreaked enough havoc with the Covenant to make up for their numbers.

A lithe woman came forward and motioned for them to be at ease with a wave of her hand; the Spartans, entirely in unison without trying, relaxed, widened their stances, and clasped their hands behind their backs. The woman raised an eyebrow. Her hair was jet black, cut to a buzz, and her eyes were a daring blue that stuck out startlingly. John knew, from his genetics classes when he was ten, that blue eyes

were recessive genes, getting rarer with every generation of humans.

"Master Chief?" She peered at the visors. John took a step forward. Few people could tell the Spartans apart in their armor, and fewer still had seen them out of it.

"Master Chief Petty Officer John-117, reporting for duty," John answered, calmly.

"Excellent. You look almost perfect." She circled him; John shifted slightly, unused to scrutiny. "Good, good. We might have to touch up some of theseâ€|" She muttered to herself as she rounded Kelly and Linda, too, and then James last.

"I'm Kate Ublood. Just call me Kate." She snapped her fingers at a harried-looking man. The man had close-cropped brown hair and a brown eye. His other was missing, an eye patch in its place; he hadn't gotten, or didn't want, a cloned organ, John supposed.

"This is my assistant and technician, Steward. He's something of the makeup specialist." Steward bobbed his head slightly in greeting; John inclined his own in return.

"And this is the crew," Kate continued, gesturing to the men and women behind her. "You're here first â€“ ah, there you are!" She was addressing someone behind John, and he moved sideways. His Spartans opened a hole for several clean ODSTs as they marched into the room, snapped off a salute, and stood at attention.

"Yes, yes," Kate purred. John compared her to a well-running Warthog engine for a moment. But no 'Hog engine stared holes into people like she was mentally undressing them.

The ODSTs and Spartans discreetly kept their distances from each other. Helljumpers were all talk, John knew, and they didn't like being up-staged by him and his "freaks."

"Have your orders been explained?" Kate asked absently, rubbing her hands together. John noticed that Steward was backing up, but not in fear; he seemed to be trying to fit them all in a box he made with his fingers.

Odd, John thought to himself. He answered Mrs. Ublood courteously. "We were told this was a mission to raise troop morale."

Kate waved her hand. "Yeah, close enough. Alright, you!" She pointed at the ODSTs. "Get your butts to those tables for make up."

One of the soldiers blanched. "What?"

"You don't look dirty enough." Kate thought this would explain everything and shooed the humans off before turning to John and the Spartans. "Are any of you female?" Linda and Kelly stepped forward; John stepped back quickly. "Excellent. Let's get some pink on you."

John couldn't help but open a comm link to his team. "Remember, Spartans, this is a mission."

"Yes, sirâ€| But _pink_?" Kelly sighed.

"That's an order, Spartan." John couldn't quite conceal his smirk, and Kelly heard it. She and Linda trudged over behind the Helljumpers.

"So you two must be the guys." John and James nodded. "We'll be starting with still shots and moving our way into action shots." James had pulled out a knife from somewhere and was flipping it nervously; it didn't seem to faze Kate a bit. "Don't tell me you're camera shy," Kate scolded James. Silently, the Spartan shook his head.

It took a few minutes for Steward to pronounce everyone ready for the cameras. John and James had been given replicas of guns â€“ they were as light as a feather in his hand, and 10% bigger than standard issue. Kate explained that they were oversize props.

Linda and Kelly were sulking. Their normally green, and now alien-blood tie dye, armor was carefully colored pink in certain areas, highlighting the different sections of armor.

"Pink looks good on you," James said over the comm, chuckling quietly. He was one of the most emotional of the Spartans.

"Let's see how good it looks on youâ€|" Kelly was the fastest of the Spartans and, before John or Linda could intervene, had picked up a bucket of pink paint and hurled it at James.

James dodged it but Kelly followed through with a second bucket that impacted squarely on his chest, covering him in pink. Steward groaned, though all of the normal humans had also taken several steps away from the giants trying to nail each other like four year olds.

"Enough!" John barked. He was amused, but this was a mission. "Kelly, stand down." Kelly was already leaning against the wall, a nonchalant smirk definitely on her face. Linda was silent, standing calmly by one of the cameras. James was trying to wipe the quickly-drying paint from his green armor, but just succeeded in smudging it with blue and purple alien blood.

Kate was biting her lip â€“ but in anger or amusement, John couldn't tell.

"Alright, youâ€|" She pointed to James, "You're dismissed."

James snapped off a crisp salute, turned, and stomped out quickly. John cleared his throat; James answered on the comm quickly. "I'm glad to be out of there. You all have _fun_."

Kelly realized she'd just gotten him out of what was probably going to be a very humiliating experience and her shoulders slumped a little. The humans wouldn't notice, but John knew instantly. "That's what you get for trying to attack him," he told her sternly.

"Yes, sir," Kelly answered smugly. "But it was worth it."

"Alright, you five, right here." Kate was arranging the ODSTs on the ground. The place was covered in green fabric; a green screen, John

realized. Some of the soldiers were made to look dead, and several gallons of fake blood had probably been used in the transformation. He eyed the lady directing their placement warily. How would dead soldiers raise troop morale?

A few were standing behind a fake-cement barricade, told to look like they were frantically driving off some alien enemies. Said enemies would be added in later using computer graphics.

Then it was the Spartan's turn; Kelly and Linda were told to hunker down behind the Marines. John was supposed to stand over them, elevated a little on a solid block one of the crew brought over, and pretend he was shooting as well.

This is raising troop morale? John thought to himself. He hefted the fake gun in his hands; he had to be extra gentle with the plastic frame. He could snap it in an instant.

Kate rearranged them so it looked like the ODSTs were kicking butt on their own, and then had all three Spartans pose in various combinations for a while. John's right foot was soaked in blood; it had nearly filled his armor to the knee. It squished every time he walked, but the blood stopped flowing.

All three Spartans were quickly tiring of this new "mission," especially since they had to slow themselves down so the photographers circling them like Jackals could get good, focused shots.

Steward occasionally darted in to fix a lock of hair, a smudged alien blood tattoo, or replace a weapon.

"It feels like I'm a mannequin," Kelly complained. John couldn't help but agree.

Kate finally seemed satisfied and nodded. "Alright, now we can move on to the second part. Action shots, everyone!"

John almost groaned. His head was throbbing with a headache, but he pushed it back again. His foot was numb, and he could feel bones somewhere in his hand grating together.

"This is more sadistic than falling out of a Pelican," Kelly grumbled. "I'd rather face a dozen Hunters than another mission like this, Chief."

"Acknowledged. Stow that belly aching, Spartan."

"Touchy," Kelly muttered rebelliously.

John raised an eyebrow. No one was in a good mood. Linda's comm snapped to life with a crackle. "I hope that paint stains James's armor," she muttered.

Even Linda? John wondered. Linda was calm, reserved and, apparently, a little annoyed.

"Alright, you four, start panicking." The four ODSTs Kate was referring to glanced at each other, then at her, with raised eyebrows. She flapped her hands at them. "Pretend a dozen Elites are

coming down on your position and there's a Hunter pair flanking you. I don't care, just panic."

"We're Helljumpers, ma'am," one explained. "We don't panic."

"Imagine all human females suddenly disappeared."

Each of the ODSTs grimaced. "Point taken," the speaker said.

"I wish you'd all disappear right about now!" another murmured; John barely caught it with his augmented hearing. He suppressed a small smile; he was having the same longing thoughts.

"You three will go to their rescue. And you," Kate beckoned to John. "You, Chief, will take on this."

A big robot wheeled into the room, pushed by a crewman. It looked like a blob that had Hunter spines.

"This is a Hunter."

"Like hell," an ODST muttered.

"You will tackle it. The computer will take care of the rest."

"Ma'am, no disrespect, but I will probably crush right through it," John said gravely.

Kate pursed her lips thoughtfully. "Which of you is lightest?"

John motioned at Kelly, who shrugged slightly. "If by "light," ma'am, I weigh the least, 1300 pounds, to be exact." All the ODSTs blinked; everyone blinked. Kelly shrugged in her armor. "The armor is half a ton," she explained.

"I like my girls a little meaty, but damn," a Helljumper muttered.

Kate sighed. "We'll have to forget that scene, then! Alright, you three, just pretend to rescue them."

John glanced at his Spartans, and then at the Helljumpers. There was bad blood between the ODSTs and Spartans, but it looked like the regular humans would be taking a back seat in the fame this time. Just like they had been for the entire war.

"Alright, you heard her," the Chief said over his speakers.

"Spartans, form up." The three armored tanks stood in a line just off-camera. The ODSTs began shooting wildly; it was silent, since the guns were fake, but they acted like they were being buffeted by kickback anyway.

"Someone scream," Kate called encouragingly.

"Oh, no, whatever shall we do," one ODST yelled pompously. "If only we were freaks, we could kill them all."

John and the Spartans bristled. Kate called a cut and scolded the men in the camera. "This has to be believable."

"Sorry, ma'am, but an ODST never asks for help. Especially from _them_."

"You're on the same damn side," Kate snapped. She sighed, frustrated. "Oh, never mind. You guys, go, get out of here." She waved away the Helljumpers who fled as quickly as possible, the dead ones getting up with groans as they stretched. Her eyes alighted on the Spartans, still standing off set.

"I'm sorry about that," she said softly. "We'll pick it up tomorrow. Dismissed."

Three arms silently saluted and then the three green giants turned smoothly and clunked out; Kate pursed her lips and surveyed the scene.

John walked quickly. He had been through bad missions, but that had to take the cake. He and his Spartans were not there for the cameras. They were there to protect humanity, to save lives if they could. The Spartans had been made to kill. Not act.

"John, you're limping." Kelly's voice, concerned, broke through John's gloomy thoughts. He glanced down; his armor was smudged, but wasn't leaking the small pool of blood that had probably died his calf red by now.

"Nothing major, Kelly," he said, waving her off with one hand. "Let's all get out of our armor." They hurried to their bunks and quickly locked the door behind them. James was already there, sleeping; he woke to make sure they were alright, rolled over, and went back to sleep.

Kelly wrenched her helmet off at the same time as Linda and John; they were all eager to get out of the armor they'd been in since the previous day. Or something; Slipspace tended to warp a person's clock, as did constant battling and adrenaline.

Kelly tousled her buzz cut, shaking sweat from her brown eyes. John ran his hand through his slightly longer brown hair, coming away sticky with sweat and blood. He set his helmet down on his bed and slowly began taking his armor off, taking inventory of his injuries as he did so.

He had two broken fingers, which he quickly splinted to straight fingers. They would heal in a few days, and this Slipspace jump was supposed to last at least a week. John noticed several bruises, well formed, on his abdomen. Probably from tackling all those Elites when he ran out of ammo, or getting hit by plasma. It didn't kill him, but it could knock him around.

He stripped out of the chest plate quickly, setting it on its stand to clean later, and freed his left leg. He looked at it carefully, noticing a few pulls, but it was nothing a little R&R couldn't fix. Then he carefully disassembled his right leg's armor, holding the boot to make sure he didn't spill the puddle of blood collected therein.

His calf was completely red, and the source of the bleeding was immediately apparent; a Needler had caught his ankle and a sliver had

blown through his armor, just enough to nick a fairly large vein. It was already clotted. The deck of the ship was cold under his bare toes; all of the Spartans were naked, since they didn't wear clothing inside the suit, but it had never bothered him or his team. They had known each other for too long, and through too many situations, to let anatomy bother them.

"Nice leg," Kelly noted wryly. Linda and James glanced over; John shrugged and stepped into the showers to empty the boot of blood. His whole body needed a good scrubbing, but he always took care of the MJOLNIR first.

Kelly was already starting to buff and clean as he sat down on the stool designed to bear his nearly 400 pounds of muscle. Kelly and Linda spoke quietly as all three of them cleaned; James's armor already sat on its stand, gleaming. There was no trace of pink on it.

John had just started his first boot " leaving the more blood-stained one to rinse in the bathroom " when Kelly finished cleaning and took over the bathroom. She showered quickly, allowing herself a few extra seconds of warm water to relax in, before exiting, scrubbing her brown hair rapidly with a black towel.

"That feels so good," she muttered, finding a pair of shorts and a shirt to throw on and sleep in, just in case. There had been one time when an unwelcome guest had barged into the Spartan quarters and found himself amongst a group of very angry naked men and women. From then on, John had insisted that everyone wear some sort of clothing if there was a chance of that repeating itself.

John motioned for Linda to use the shower first; she smiled softly and was in and out within two minutes, her red hair gleaming. Her green eyes and red hair had earned her the nickname "Xmas," not to mention her uncanny talent with the sniper rifle.

Finally, John enjoyed a shower of his own, using some of the precious water to clean his boot from the inside. It ran red for a while and then clear, and he washed his hair and scrubbed his bruised, aching, and bloody body down. He stepped out, noting that he had taken a little over four minutes in the shower, not bad, and his boot was clean. He stowed it with the rest of his gear and looked at James, still sleeping peacefully.

"Alright, everyone, time for some rest," John said. Kelly nodded and Linda climbed into her bunk, collapsing and making the steel groan. "Gentle on that, Petty Officer." Linda waved in understanding and rolled onto her side.

Kelly and John got into the respective bunks; John stared at the ceiling above him and slowly drifted into a semi-deep slumber. The Spartans never truly slept unless they were in cryo, which John contemplated for the next day. First, though, he wanted to sleep in the warm ship for a while. Then he would eat.

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Well, what do you think? Please read and review! This is a going to be very short, probably just a few more chapters, to test the waters.

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2. A Dry Run

Disclaimer: I don't own Halo or anything about it. Except my OC(s). Because I can. _

_This is my very first attempt at writing any fanfiction but TMNT-based! Please leave some reviews so I know how I'm doing. I apologize for the slow start, but I wanted to introduce the main players. Also, to Kimjel â€“ who else would be a protagonist but the Covenant! I'm getting there. Just had to have my fun first.

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Chapter 2: A Dry Run

John ducked, warded off another blow, and struck towards Kelly's midsection. She flowed out of the way and tackled him; they rolled off down the garage, sparring silently. James and Linda were watching, ready to offer suggestions and critiques. It was a common practice between the Spartans; they couldn't spar against any non-augmented humans, and not many humans could follow their actions when they were moving quickly.

Suddenly, the door behind Linda opened; all four Spartans turned quickly to see who had invaded their garage. Kate was standing in the doorway, apparently unfazed at seeing them in the flesh.

John and Kelly separated, rose to their feet fluidly, and snapped off crisp salutes just a fraction of a second behind James and Linda. John wasn't sure if Mrs. Ublood had any military rank â€“ she hadn't been introduced with one â€“ but it was hard not to salute anyone with as much authority in her tone.

"At ease," she said, walking into the room. No one else was with her. "It's time to try it again. We've brought up some Marines this time, for the action shots. Hopefully, we won't have a repeat of yesterday."

John nodded briskly and motioned for his Spartans to begin preparing their armor.

"Do you mind if I stay to watch?" Kate asked John quietly, walking towards him.

"No, ma'am, so long as you are comfortable," John responded. He glanced at his team for confirmation, but they were not bothered, either. The technicians who would normally help them into and out of their armor had seen them naked before anyway, and they did not understand modesty.

John waited for his team to begin, offering to help each one with putting on the heavier pieces â€“ they were sometimes awkward to handle if one was doing it by oneself. Once the rest of his team was suited up, John stepped into his quickly. He was more practiced in donning his armor solo than James, Linda, or Kelly, but it took ten minutes.

"Incredible," Kate breathed as each Spartan locked their helmet in

place. John's suit hissed as it pressurized and the HUD glowed to life.

"Alright, follow me. Have you all had breakfast?" Kate led the Spartans out; each had to duck to get through the door, but in the hallways, they were able to walk comfortably.

"Yes, ma'am," John replied for all of them.

They descended to C Deck and went back into the large filming room. The crew was milling about, same as yesterday, but were joined now by half a dozen battle-worn Marines. John noticed that the cuts and bruises they appeared to sport were just more make-up, but it was difficult to tell.

The Marines saluted him and the Spartans, and they returned the salute. Relations between the two groups were indifferent, at best, but Marines were more apt to be grateful if a Spartan hauled their asses from the fire.

"Snap to, everyone!" Kate called out, clapping her hands once. The Marines and Spartans gathered just off-set, in two groups. The film crews picked up cameras, microphones, and other equipment, settling it on their shoulders or into hip carriers. "Alright, you, Marines, up to your posts."

Apparently, they'd been briefed before because each Marine marched into place easily. One was carrying a fake arm, bloodied at the stump. He placed it near himself and lay down as though he was dead, hiding his perfectly good arm under his body. It looked like the limb had been blown off.

"Remember to bite those blood packs," Kate instructed, turning to the Spartans. "You four will be rescuing these poor, unfortunate souls." John nodded in understanding. "Since you'd crush our robotic Hunter, we'll have to leave him out of this until we get a better idea of how to build him so you won't."

"Solid steel might work," a Marine said teasingly. He gave the Spartans a thumbs-up; he was unusually cheerful for a Marine.

"Hm, yes. You're supposed to be dead," she reminded the Marine.

He chuckled and lowered his head to the bloody pool underneath it obligingly.

"Now, you four. You'll be rescuing them, in pairs of two. There's not enough room for all four of you on set at once. And it might break my little hill." The humans without armor chuckled. It was a running joke among the Navy; Spartans tended to break things. "Remember, lots of yelling."

"Ma'am, we speak via comm link. You will not hear us," John pointed out quietly.

"Turn on your speakers anyway. It's no fun if they can't hear you giving orders."

John motioned to his Spartans, and each activated their speakers. "Yes, ma'am," they chorused. Kate grinned like a Cheshire

cat.

"Quiet on the set!" The few mutterings between crew members instantly stopped. "Lights!" The battlefield was bathed in cold white light. People were standing with screens off to the side, but what purpose they could possibly have, John had no clue. "Cameras!" Each camera was clicked to on and began recording. "Action!"

At that, the Marines began hollering. One loud exclamation of, "Holy shit, it's an Elite!" wormed its way through the sound of silent gunfire and yelling Marines. John and Kelly took that as their cue and bounded on scene. Kelly led the way, zipping into a position behind the Marines so fast John doubted the cameras would be able to follow her.

Remembering his orders to slow himself down for the camera's frames, he stomped up next to her and primed a fake grenade from his belt, threw it, and barked, "Grenade!" All of the Marines and Spartans ducked.

One of the Marines pretended to get hit by a plasma burn and cried out in pain; John felt him collapse against his armor. He glanced down; the Marine grinned, winked, and rolled off of him, biting on something in his mouth. Realistic blood began to seep from his mouth.

John rolled his eyes inside his visor. Marines, they were all the same.

"Andâ€œ cut!" The Spartans stood, gingerly avoided stepping on any of the "dead" Marines at their feet. "Excellent. You two, next," Kate ordered briskly, waving at James and Linda. "Let's go, let's go!"

John and Kelly watched this time. Kelly darted to the other side of the set where she could pretend to be an Elite, to spark imagination. Kate ordered her to warble like the Elites did just before a charge, and she managed a very good imitation of it.

The set suddenly went silent as the speakers overhead sparked and crackled to life. "This is Admiral Hood," the speaker belched, squawking. "All hands, prepare for battle. I repeat, to battle stations. We are entering the Tauri system. Victoria is under attack. Our orders are to deposit our special weapons and defend the planet. Spartans, report to docking bay eight. Admiral Hood, out."

The speakers crackled back to silence; Kate looked up to dismiss the Spartans only to notice they were already gone. The Marines were right behind them, waving goodbye and grabbing towels from a bin by the door to wipe off their make-up.

Kate smirked and motioned for three of her camera crews to follow her. She led them on a run to the bridge, where Admiral Hood was barking orders at harried-looking men and women operating the stations there.

"Admiral, requesting permission to accompany the Spartans," Kate said as the tall man noticed her. He quirked an eyebrow in surprise.

"They are going into battle, Mrs. Ubrood."

"I know, sir. They're not great actors, sir. We need something better for the campaign. I think this is it." Kate grinned. She wasn't afraid.

"Very well, but they will not be ordered to keep your crew safe especially. They will do what they do best. You may not be able to keep up with them," he warned.

"I have a solution to that," Kate assured him, running back out of the bridge. Her three crewmen glanced at each other, saluted the Admiral smartly, and followed.

"Time to break out the big guns," she told them, huffing, as she sped down the hallways. "Get those portable cameras and key them to follow one Spartan each." The three broke off and headed back for C Deck; Kate continued into docking bay eight.

The Spartans were lifting impossibly big crates into Pelicans. She spotted one of them notice her; suddenly, all four glanced over. They almost seemed to communicate silently.

"Master Chief?"

The one she was looking at shook its head and motioned to their right; the other Spartan marched over.

"You need a way to identify yourself while in your armor," Kate scolded. "You have a secondary mission. It won't impede your original mission," she assured him. He was just standing there, seemingly unfazed as she looked up at him. Four of her crewmembers came in, each carrying one of the large spheres. Kate motioned to them; she didn't see the Spartan move, but she was sure he saw them.

"There will be a camera following each of you. They're a special new type; they can fly themselves, and they'll be controlled by a few people here. You don't have to worry about protecting them; if they're blown to pieces, they are expensive but they send everything they record directly back here so we will still have the footage."

The Master Chief nodded in understanding, saluted, and moved back to loading Pelicans. Kate shook her head slightly and turned to check on the camera equipment.

"Sir, new orders?" Kelly asked. John didn't turn to her as he shoved a box of supplies into the belly of the Pelican.

"We'll be on film again. They have flying cameras to follow each of us. You are not to protect them unless you have nothing better to do." Three green acknowledgement lights in his display indicated that his team understood.

"Our second time to Victoria," Kelly said in a private comm link to John. "Remember Graves?"

"Yes," John answered. "The forest will make the invasion difficult to contain. There are many hiding places."

Kelly hummed agreement as all four Spartans, their task of loading the Pelicans done, went to the armory at the side of the bay to gather equipment. Linda grabbed a sniper rifle, a pistol for close-up work, and extra clips. Kelly and John decided to prepare for a lot of shooting and only brought a few grenades each, loading their belts with clips of ammo instead. James carefully chose his weaponry, obviously intending to mostly use grenades and careful shots from a powerful pistol.

The speakers crackled to life. "All hands, prepare to launch. It's hot out there; pilots, be careful." The ship slowed noticeably; suddenly, it lurched. John and the Spartans stayed on their feet, but most everyone else fell to the ground, skidding a few feet.

"We've been hit," one Marine yelled. "Get me on the ground!" Everyone was loading up into Pelicans; John led his Spartans into the one with the lightest load. The four cameras followed them in; Kelly glanced at one and then looked at John, obviously amused.

"Here we go!" the pilot yelled. The Spartans remained standing as the Pelican dropped from the bay, into the atmosphere of the planet. John looked out of the open hatch; dense forests below turned the planet green. He could see a city, probably their destination, as the pilot fought for control. The Pelican lurched as a crosswind caught it; John grabbed a hand-hold, making sure it was secured to the frame.

Pelicans followed behind them, weaving. Suddenly, a Covenant Phantom Gunboat glided into position behind the group of Pelicans. It began firing; John heard a pilot scream as a plasma ball engulfed his cockpit. The Pelican spun off course, quickly losing altitude.

"Brace yourselves," John ordered his crew, moving back from the hatch. The Covenant ship was coming for them, firing plasma as it followed them deeper into the gravity well of the planet. John looked down; if they were hit now, he doubted his Spartans would live through the fall.

The ship lurched with another gust of wind and a plasma ball just missed their wing. The pilot was trying to shake the Phantom but it followed doggedly.

"I can't shake it!" the pilot cried in frustration. "I'm going to have to insist you all jump. I'll get you as close as I can, but I can't touch down. That bastard'll light us up before you could say 'shit'."

John indicated his agreement and motioned for the Spartans to untie the supplies. They threw them out of the hatch; they had parachutes for just this reason. The pilot struggled to control his ship as they skimmed lower; John could make out individual trees below. Suddenly, the ship lurched again, and John noticed that the stubby wing to his left had been sheared off. The Pelican started to tumble.

"Go, go!" the pilot yelled, struggling with the controls. John glanced at his Spartans; they stood silently.

"Rendezvous here," he ordered, calmly. They were only dropping a few hundred feet; nothing they couldn't handle. He marked the location of

a lake he had noticed just behind them in their HUD maps.

Then he gracefully leapt out of the Pelican, spreading his arms and legs to slow his descent. He angled himself away from the Pelican so his Spartans could follow and concentrated on the lake. He aimed himself for it, trying to make his entry shallow enough to slow himself down on the tips of trees.

Behind him, he heard the Pelican explode and it dropped like a stone underneath him. John was careful not to move his head too much, to avoid spinning, but he caught a glimpse of the flying camera sticking next to him, its eye turned to the ground.

"We have company," Kelly said through the comm link. John carefully looked over his shoulder to see a Banshee start diving on him. He quickly rolled out of the way, dropping fast, as its plasma guns fired.

John quickly spread his arms and legs again, pulling back into a shallow dive. He saw the Banshee underneath him and then Kelly plummeted past. She landed on the Banshee with a thump he couldn't hear, but she quickly dispatched the pilot and climbed into the cockpit.

"I have the Banshee," she said simply.

"Prepare to keep Covenant off our tails," John ordered. The trees were only a few seconds away. "Everyone, meet up at the lake and we'll hump it from there."

He shut off his comm and speakers and prepared for a rather brutal landing. The tips of the tallest trees brushed his armor; he tucked himself into a ball and his speed immediately increased. He felt himself crash through several good-sized pines, each impact jarring his teeth. Suddenly, he felt a little resistance, and then he was through a trunk and hit the dirt. He rolled, taking the damage and spreading it out, bouncing off of another tree's roots before finally coming to a stop.

He could hear another of his teammates come down close by; the cracking of the trees was a unique sound. It wasn't their first hot drop, but, as he sat up, he wished the Pelicans had better chances of actually making it to the surface. Pilots were quickly running out.

John twisted, checking himself for injuries. Only a few bruises and a twisted ankle; he'd survive. He looked around and oriented himself to his map; the lake was just ahead. He heard a Banshee overhead and ducked under cover, unwilling to risk being seen if it wasn't Kelly's.

Two green acknowledgement lights lit up his HUD, drawing his attention away from the sky. Linda and James were down and safe. Kelly's lit a moment later; she was probably at the lake.

John took the rifle from his back and started towards the lake, keeping an eye on his motion detector. He doubted the Covenant had moved away from the cities yet, but he'd been surprised before.

He stopped at the edge of the clearing; Kelly's Banshee was sitting

by the lakeside, but she was nowhere to be seen. He clicked his comm once; Kelly appeared at the opposite side of the lake and darted towards him. It was a small lake, almost a pond; she made it to him in a few seconds.

James and Linda joined them quickly. John glanced up; only three cameras had survived the crash. The fourth had probably been crushed or hit by a tree on its way down.

"Our orders are to make it here," John told them all as they crouched in the underbrush. He dropped a marker on the map in their HUDs; they were supposed to cover the troops " and wreak havoc of their own " in the nearest city. "For now, we'll go in pairs. Split up if necessary. James and Linda, Kelly and I. Clear?"

"Yes, sir," the Spartans answered quickly.

John nodded and moved away, Kelly following him. She had dismantled the Banshee after landing it, so the Covenant wouldn't find it. The two pushed it into the pond to let it sink and then headed towards the city. James and Linda would take a different route.

They jogged silently for three miles, eyes and ears open for Covenant troops. They found nothing; even the animals of the forest had disappeared.

Suddenly, Kelly's light winked red; John dropped into the bush. She was ahead, and had probably found enemies. He crawled up to her position; she motioned with a flick of her wrist. A troop of Grunts, overseen by two Jackals, were just on the edge of the forest ahead of them. The cameras stayed back, watching over the heads of the two Spartans.

John nodded and raised his rifle; Kelly did the same. They fired in unison, taking out the four Grunts so quickly the Jackals were unable to bring their shields up before they became targets themselves.

The two Jackals dropped without a sound and Kelly darted ahead to secure their shields, tossing one to John. They strapped them to their forearms as another layer of protection.

John policed a pair of plasma grenades from the Grunts. He preferred them to the UNSC-issue frag grenades. They moved silently across the clearing, hating to be so exposed. The buildings of the city were just ahead, and in the distance, fire glowed on the horizon.

Silently, Kelly and John split up, separated by a block as they moved silently into the city. They came across the occasional signs of resistance, but mostly, the roads were just littered with dead civilians. The Covenant had already cleared this area.

Kelly's light winked red again, and John quickly ducked into an alley. He heard the sharp retort of her rifle across the buildings separating them, and then silence. Her light winked green and they continued.

John rounded a corner and saw a group of Marines hunkered down behind a car on its side. They were clearly resting after a long battle; two were trying to staunch the bleeding in a third Marine's side. That

Marine was pale and shaking. John moved up silently to them; they glanced up and were clearly relieved.

"We're pinned, sir," one of the Marines told him. "They've got a plasma turret out there." John nodded in understanding and peeked around the car. Sure enough, a troop of Grunts milled about a plasma turret. A red-armored Elite was barking orders, his split jaws dripping saliva.

"What's that?" one of the Marines whispered, pointing to the camera.

"A camera," John said shortly. "Ignore it."

"Yes, sir," the Marine said quietly, turning back to watching the rooftops for snipers.

"Kelly, we have a situation," John said into his comm.

"I see it, sir." Kelly waved from across the street; she had hunkered behind a car of her own.

"I have wounded here," John said. "We'll take out that turret and the Elite and call for evac."

"Acknowledged. Rabbit, sir?"

John nodded. "Go."

He waited while Kelly darted from her position into the middle of the street. She whistled at the Covenant, drawing the attention of the Marines as well.

"What the fuck?!" one of the Marines gasped. "He's gonnaâ€|"

Suddenly, the plasma turret fired; but Kelly was already moving, darting up the street. John swung out from behind the car, firing on the Grunt manning the turret. The Elite roared a challenge upon seeing the green soldiers; it brandished an energy sword and charged Kelly. John continued picking off Grunts as Kelly unloaded her rifle's clip into the Elite. It stumbled just as it reached her, and she punched a hand through its head. It dropped, releasing its energy sword.

The street silenced; Kelly ran back to the Marines and John, kneeling by the wounded man. She assessed his wound carefully and then injected him with the biofoam from a first aid kit in one Marine's backpack.

"You'll live," she told the Marine; he nodded weakly and passed out, going limp. Kelly picked him up effortlessly and John motioned for the Marines to follow them. They swept down the street, and John paused only to pick up a couple more plasma grenades. The team worked their way into the city, looking for a parking lot large enough for a Pelican to evac the wounded Marine.

John took point, leading his Spartan and the Marines as they came across more small groups of Elites, Grunts, and Jackals. Kelly kept the wounded Marine out of danger; the Spartans had standing orders to

save as many lives as possible.

John poked his head around a corner and was greeted with a roar of rage. A pair of Hunters down the block raised their fuel rod guns and primed them for a shot; John winked his light red to Kelly and said over his speakers, "Hunters," before diving into the middle of the street and coming up firing. The Hunters tried to shift their aim but their guns released the plasma early, harmlessly blowing holes in the concrete to John's right.

The two Hunters hunkered behind their shields and advanced, jerking. John threw a grenade; the Hunters dashed out of the way. They could move quickly if necessary. The closest one was closing in, and John rolled out of the way as it tried to bash him with its shield. The camera whirled above them, distracting the Hunter just long enough for John to spot a flash of unprotected orange flesh and pump it full of lead. The Hunter screamed and fell; the second Hunter bellowed angrily and charged.

John ducked under the shield and spines that could cut through him, shields or no, and stuck a grenade from his pocket on the Hunter's armor, rolling away. The Hunter turned to face him, oblivious of the grenade on its back. It detonated, showering John with orange blood. The second Hunter fell.

John winked his green light and stood back up, wiping as much of the blood off as he could and just managing to smear it.

As they moved on, one of the Marines kicked a Hunter, yelling at it. Kelly picked that Marine up by the scruff of his uniform like a bad puppy and walked him to the end of the block before releasing him again.

"Over here!" one of the Marines shouted. "We've got wounded here, too." John and Kelly jogged over to a store front; behind the shot-out glass displays, a team of Marines watched them carefully as they ducked through the door.

"We've been holding this area as an evac zone," one of the new Marines said quietly. "We have a collection of wounded already. Drop you man here," he told Kelly. She gently placed the Marine on her shoulder into the hands of two waiting medics. "We'll take care of him."

John nodded and moved back out; the original group of Marines followed, leaving behind one member to augment the team holding the zone.

Kelly and John continued to move into the city, the Marines tagging along. They routed more Covenant, killing most and chasing a few Grunts down when they tried to flee. Kelly continued to play rabbit with the bigger groups, allowing John and the Marines to soften them up a little first.

John glanced at his ammo counter as he reloaded; he would need to resort to Covenant weapons soon. He preferred the rattle of the rifle, and the rapid fire, but Covenant weapons were useful, too.

The cameras continued to follow each Spartan, and after a gunfight,

would circle the carnage of the aliens. None of the Marines were wounded as they joined another group, pinned down by a Wraith tank that was making quick work of the barricade. Kelly and John had handled the tanks before, but they were tough.

John looked around; they were in a residential district. Most of the homes were squashed together, making it impossible to easily flank the tank. There was a group of Grunts and a few Jackals accompanying the Wraith as it rumbled and belched plasma.

"You, Marines, distract them," John ordered. He and Kelly preparing to move, lining up on opposite sides of the barricade.

"Go!" John barked, sprinting forward. The Marines fired into the crowd of Grunts, taking down quite a few. A methane tank blew up, engulfing a pair of Jackals standing by the unfortunate Grunt.

Kelly pulled ahead of John and fired at a Jackal; John targeted his own shielded Covenant. The Grunts were dropping like flies to the Marines, clearly startled by the two green demons running at them. They fled, squeaking in distress, as the Wraith moved back, trying to track the two blurs.

A plasma mortar exploded just behind John, splashing his shields; they drained a bit, but he was too close now for the Wraith to hit him. Kelly leapt onto the tank ahead of him and began tearing at the hatch, trying to get at the Elite within. John turned his attention to the Jackals. He shot one in the foot; it howled in pain and he was among them. A quick flick of his foot caught one Jackal in the stomach, and his foot sunk into its intestines. It died with a squawk.

Another Jackal brought its plasma pistol up and fired; John felt it cascade over his shields, draining them. He attacked the Jackal, butting it in the head with his rifle. Its head snapped back, the neck clearly broken, and sunk to the ground. John activated the shield on his forearm and whirled to face the last Jackal, just in time; the shield took the brunt of a plasma bolt and then John pounded at the Jackal's shield with a fist, broke through, and snapped its neck.

The battlefield was quiet; Kelly dragged the limp body of an Elite, its head crushed from above, out of the tank and dropped a pair of grenades in the hatch. She jumped off the tank as the two grenades exploded with a dull thump and gutted the beast.

The cameras whirled around the scene, moving for close-ups of dead aliens. One of them came for a close-up of Kelly's visor and she let it.

"Nice job, sirs," a Marine whistled as he came up to their position; his troop followed, as did Kelly and John's stragglers. "We'd've been paste if you hadn't come."

John turned on his external speakers. "These four will stay with you," he said, indicating the Marines that had followed him and Kelly. "Continue mopping up the Covenant."

The Marines saluted, which the Spartans returned, and moved off deeper into the city.

"Linda, James, report," John ordered. James came back almost immediately.

"It's light resistance," he said calmly. John could hear faint screaming in the background. "One Marine down so far."

"There is wounded evac here," John told him, dropping another marker on their HUD maps.

"We'll get him there," Linda said. "We haven't encountered anything but Grunts and Jackals. I don't like it, sir."

"We've taken on Hunters and a Wraith," Kelly said, breaking into the conversation. "You're just lucky."

"I thought John was the lucky one," James remarked with a smug tone. John sighed quietly; it was a frequent comment. His Spartans only joked when they were on the battlefield, in their comfort zone.

"Focus, Spartans," John muttered. A chorus of "Yes, sir" answered him. "Linda, James, evac your wounded and then split up. We need to fan out; there isn't much Covenant on the ground yet."

James and Linda acknowledged his order; Kelly nodded. "Good luck, everyone." John ended the conversation and turned to Kelly. "I will head north," he said. He'd be going towards the center of the city. Kelly nodded and walked off to the east immediately.

John made his way deeper into the city. The camera followed him, whirring away. Occasionally it would dart over to a burned shell of a store, or go up high to take shots of the city above him. The Spartan was silent as he made his way into the city. In the distance, he could hear rifles firing, and then the boom of something large exploding.

It was peaceful for him for a few moments before he rounded a corner and nearly ran into a group of blue-armored Elites. They stared at each other for a moment before the largest of the Elites charged with a warble; John emptied his rifle into the alien's midsection, moving away. It had an energy sword in its left hand.

He finally punctured the shield around the taller alien and rounds tore through its stomach. It bellowed and fell; John turned to the remaining two Elites. It was rare to see them without Grunts or Jackals, as they usually led groups of underlings into battle, but these three had just been walking together.

He pushed the puzzle from his mind as the two Elites charged in unison, firing from their plasma rifles, yelling what were probably religious battle cries. John switched to his pistol as his rifle clacked empty, circling, and succeeding in wearing down one Elite's armor and punching a round through its skull.

The other charged and tried to bash him in the head with its plasma rifle; John blocked the punch and brought a fist into the Elite's midsection. Its shields held and it bellowed, spittle flecking on John's visor.

The two grappling were suddenly throw into the air; John's shields drained entirely. Bewildered, John rolled until he was on top of the Elite and punched its head until its shields gave and his hand cracked the cement under the Elite. Its skull lay in fragments, purple blood oozing.

John, remembering the third attacker, rolled â€“ and not a moment too soon. The tell-tale green of a Hunter's fuel rod cannon exploded where he had been not a moment ago, vaporizing most of the dead Elite.

John turned to face the pair of Hunters at the end of the block. He wasn't nervous, but he was cautious; the two Hunters were at the forefront of a Wraith tank, surrounded by Grunts and Jackals. Perhaps that was what had knocked him and the Elite on their asses.

It was a huge force for one Spartan to go against alone, especially since he had no loaded weapons. John leapt to the side as the second Hunter fired its fuel rod cannon at him; it impacted the cement and sent him crashing into a miraculously unbroken window. It shattered and he skidded into what was obviously a clothing store.

He was up and moving as soon as he touched linoleum, priming two frag grenades. John leapt out of the window again, moving as he threw the small balls into the midst of the group. Grunts shrieked and tried to flee, but the grenades detonated and destroyed most of the underdog units. A couple of methane tanks were obviously leaking; John followed the frag grenades with a pair of plasma ones. They lit the leaking methane and two fireballs engulfed more Covenant.

John ducked into an alley just as the Hunters fired simultaneously, the building he crouched behind getting the brunt of the attack. John's shields had filled in again, but he knew he couldn't suffer another direct hit.

His ankle hurt; biofoam had already filled his chest cavity to protect the broken ribs. John could feel those ribs grating in his chest and hoped they wouldn't puncture a lung. He took inventory of his equipment; two more frag grenades, a handful of clips â€“ he reloaded both his pistol and his rifle â€“ and a single plasma grenade. Nothing heavy-duty for the Hunters or the tank, and no rabbit, either.

John hated relying on his luck, but he knew the odds were against him now. He pulled the pin from his last two frag grenades and hurled them blindly towards the group; he heard a surprised grunt, much too close for his liking, and then a grenade bounced back into the alley.

John's eyes widened in surprise and he dove away just as it detonated. Fragmentations of the grenade peppered his shields, dropping them a hair. He rolled to a stop and faced the alleyway entrance; a Hunter stared back at him through the green glow of its fuel rod cannon as it primed for a shot. John, thinking quickly, dove forward, coming up under the gun. It flashed and shot, draining his shields just from the proximity as it soared over his shoulder.

He punched the Hunter and it roared. John ducked under it â€“ quite a feat when he was nearly as big as it â€“ and ran to the opposite side of the street. The Hunter detonated, spraying the alleyway in orange

blood and tissue, the plasma grenade having been thrust deep inside the orange worms that made up the beast.

The second Hunter, back with the group, roared in grief and brought its cannon to bear on John as the Spartan unloaded his rifle at the few remaining Grunts. They dropped quickly, still milling in confusion, and John dove away from the Hunter's plasma shot.

Just one Hunter and a Wraith to go, John thought to himself grimly as he came up. Something in his ankle tore; John knew he had to end the fight soon, or he would be severely injured.

John emptied his rifle into the Hunter's shield, forcing it to go defensive as it crab-walked towards him. He quickly switched to his pistol and leapt forward. The Hunter wasn't used to being attacked physically and froze for the vital moment John needed; as he pushed against the Hunter, the Spartan saw a flash of wriggling orange flesh and emptied two pistol shots into the area.

The Hunter screeched; John could smell a bad odor through his visor. The Hunter shoved him back, rounding its back, and charged; the spines sliced through air as John threw himself to the side, rolling and coming back to his feet behind the Hunter. He saw another flash of orange and emptied his pistol into the skin; the Hunter roared again and then fell, its gun discharging into the ground.

Not forgetting the tank, John moved. He wasn't quite fast enough; his battered shields dropped again as the splash from the plasma mortar landed beside him. He felt the wave of heat and, just as quickly, his armor's thermal systems kicked in, cooling him back down.

John charged the tank, quickly coming into its vulnerable range. He leapt on it, battering the hatch with his gloved hand. It buckled under the third blow and an Elite's roar of anger rose from the cockpit as John wrenched it off.

An energy sword nearly took off his hand as he tried to punch the pilot, but the Elite was smart. It waved the sword above its head, blind but trying to wound him. John pulled out his pistol and shot at the dark interior. The Elite barked in pain and then was silent; it hadn't been shielded. The energy sword dropped into the Elite's lap, dying with a faint sputter.

A group of humans crept from the store John had been thrown into; John caught them on his motion sensor and whirled, bringing his pistol to bear but holding his fire as he noticed that they were mostly human â€“ and all children.

He climbed down from the Wraith as the dozen or so children approached him warily. A teenager, probably fourteen or fifteen, led the way. She held a baby in her arms; her blue eyes were red from crying. She and the rest of the children were relatively clean, no doubt having used clothing from the store to dress in.

"Areâ€œ! Are you a Spartan?" the teenager asked John quietly, her voice trembling.

John never got used to this. War made children grow up fast â€“ hell, he knew that better than most. But sometimes, it hit him again, that humanity's future was literally being destroyed. Every single child

that diedâ€| He shook himself and turned on his external speakers.

"Yes. I am Master Chief Petty Officer Spartan 117." The youngest of the children, probably four or five, ducked behind the older children at the sound of his voice.

"Ohâ€| I'm Jane," the teenager said. She offered her hand; John gently â€" he could accidentally crush her, he knew â€" shook it. "Are you here to save us?"

"Yes, I am." Not really, but he had standing orders. He glanced around. "Are there more?"

"No." The teenager looked like she was going to cry again. "Ourâ€| Our parentsâ€| We don't know where they are." A few of the younger children whimpered.

"Okay. Is anyone hurt?"

"Jacob is." Jane glanced at the baby in her arms. "He won't wake upâ€|"

John noticed then that the baby, swaddled in someone's shirt, was burned badly with plasma. He grimaced and gently picked Jacob up from Jane's arms. "I will take care of him," he told her softly. "Get yourselves some supplies. I will take you to a safe place."

John straightened; Jane gathered the children and they searched the stores nearby. Each found a backpacks and loaded it with food and clothing. John gently placed the dead baby in the clothing store, placing soft clothing around it. It wouldn't matter when the place was glassed, butâ€| He did it anyway.

He met the children again and wondered how he could possibly get them back. He was deep into enemy territory.

"This is Master Chief Spartan 117," he said into his comm link. "I need immediate evac for fourteen children."

He heard conferring in the background and glanced at the children; they were watching him. They had no idea he was calling to evac, he realized, and he turned on his speakers to reassure them quickly. They gathered around his feet; some sat, others stood.

"This is Foehammer. I read you, Chief. You're half a mile from closest evac point. I'll be waiting." John's map flashed as another marker was added; it was back the way he came, so hopefully there wouldn't be as many enemies.

"Roger that, Foehammer." He glanced at the children and turned on his external speakers, killing the comm. "We have transportation coming. You all need to stay behind me and keep quiet, okay?"

The children nodded. Jane picked up a four-year-old. "We'll carry the younger ones," she told John quietly. John nodded and picked up a Covenant rifle.

"Let's go," he ordered. He remembered to keep his voice soothing, though; these children didn't need any more trauma.

"Kelly, Linda, James, report." John spoke into his comm. He didn't like having to protect so many civilians, especially children, on his own.

"Yes, sir?" Kelly's voice answered first; then James and Linda responded.

"I have a dozen civilian children. Are any of you close enough to cover us?"

Each Spartan paused and checked their maps. Kelly answered in the affirmative, saying she would double-time it to his position. Linda and James were too far away, and John ordered them to continue evacing wounded troops and killing aliens.

Soon, as John crept around a building to check the next block for Covenant, he heard Kelly whistle Oly Oly Oxen Free and appeared from a building just down the block. John waved her over and she ran, stopping in front of the crowd of kids.

"Hello," Jane said, looking up at the new Spartan.

"Hey, kid." Kelly's voice was warm and the children instantly relaxed. John breathed out softly; Kelly had a way with wounded soldiers and kids. He never did. "How're you all doing?"

"Good," Jane answered. "I'm Jane." She would have offered her hand, but she carried a four-year-old.

"I'm Kelly." Kelly knelt to be on their level — or close, John supposed. "John and I are here to protect you, okay?"

"Uh huh," Jane said, nodding. "That's John?"

Kelly would have a word with him; John didn't like giving people his name, but kids needed that connection.

"That's John," Kelly confirmed. "He's a stick in the mud. I'm much more fun."

The children giggled. John watched for enemies.

"Now, we're going to play a game, okay?" The kids nodded eagerly, but the older ones knew this "game" would be a lot more important than tag. "John's going to run ahead and find somewhere to hide. Then you will follow him, and you'll run as fast as you can, okay? We don't have far to go."

"Like tag?" one of the five-year-olds piped up.

"Exactly. And when you find John, tag him, okay?" The children giggled and nodded. "Then he'll find another spot to hide. If you see any aliens, scream. We'll protect you."

One of the three-year-olds toddled over and hugged Kelly; she gently wrapped an arm around the child. The rest, except Jane and a couple of the oldest, followed suit until Kelly was buried in children.

"I love kids," Kelly confessed to John over a private comm.

"Okay, ready?" The children moved back and nodded, much more calm. They didn't look on the verge of tears. Kelly flicked her hand; John took off and the kids giggled as they watched him fly across the block.

"Who's first?" Kelly asked when John's acknowledgement light blinked green, the all-clear. Three volunteered; she sent them running together. They ran as fast as they could and got to John's spot easily. Another group of three took off as well, and then four more followed.

She sent two more, including Jane, and they made it as well; Kelly breathed out and picked up the smallest two children, hardly able to walk, let alone sprint. They clung to her armor and she took off; they gasped as she moved. Kelly, when exerting herself, could run at over 35 mph.

They regrouped and the children caught their breath. Others clamored to be carried; John picked up a pair and Kelly let another ride piggy-back.

John darted ahead again. They didn't run into any more aliens as the children played the find-John-in-the-block game. Still, the Spartans were on high alert. Children were vital to humanity's future.

Finally, John spotted a Pelican ahead. There were three Marines guarding it, including the pilot. John sprinted into the clearing and the Marines chuckled to see the children hanging off of his armor.

"We'll take it from here, Chief," a female Marine said. She looked at the children. "Ready to fly?" she asked them, grinning. They ran into the Pelican as Kelly herded the rest forward.

"Bye, Kelly! Bye John!" they chorused. Kelly waved; John did as well, though jerkily. He wasn't used to being called by his name.

The cameras followed this children into the Pelican and then back out, circling the Spartans. John ignored them and turned back to Kelly.

"Let's see if we can find more," he suggested. She nodded and took off with a final wave to the children being strapped into the Pelican. They would be taken a ship and protected; each fleet now had standing orders to rescue as many civilians as possible, put them all on one ship, and guard that ship until it fled, carrying its precious cargo to a safe colony.

The Pelican rose and John headed back into the fight. His ankle hurt, and he figured the best bet would be to commandeer that Wraith. The Grunts there probably had a few plasma grenades among them as well. It took him less than five minutes to make it back, while it had taken nearly twenty traveling with children.

John dragged the Elite from the Wraith and climbed in. He had almost no ammo left, and his ankle was sending sharp pains every time he rested weight on it. He had driven these things before and quickly turned it around, heading into the city.

Hopefully, one of Spartans wouldn't try to take him out, since he had no way of telling them _which _Wraith was his and didn't want them hesitating if they saw a Covenant Wraith.

He plowed over a group of Grunts that hadn't bothered to look when he came up behind them. They squealed as they were sucked under the Wraith's belly; John felt it rumble as it moved over the "rocky" terrain.

"Master Chief," his headset suddenly said. "Prepare your team for evac. We're pulling out."

John acknowledged the order and drove the Wraith towards the evac point he had pointed out to Linda and James.

"Kelly, Linda, James, return to the evac point," he ordered his team.

"But, sir, things are just getting interesting!" Kelly protested. She was breathing heavily.

"We're being pulled out," John said.

"Another planet for them to glassâ€|" James muttered. John sympathized; it was hard to accept defeat, and they hadn't had a solid win for months.

"I am coming in a Wraith," he told them. "It has Grunts on the front."

The silence that greeted this announcement for a second made him grin. He could imagine all of his Spartans blinking at that news. "Have you been playing bumper car with the Grunts again?" Kelly asked, a grin in her voice.

"Affirmative," John answered, a chuckle on his voice.

The Wraith was slow, but it saved John from injuring his ankle further. He could feel the tear â€“ probably his Achilles' tendon. He didn't want to aggravate it unnecessarily, and he plowed down a few more troops as he moved back to rendezvous with his team.

He rolled into the parking lot and his Spartans watched, wary in case it was actually Covenant. But they relaxed when he popped out of the hatch and jumped down, landing carefully on his good foot.

"You look beat up," Kelly commented wryly.

"I ran into enough trouble for all of us," John said with a shrug. He limped slightly, though he tried to hide it, and he knew all of his teammates could see.

"What kind of trouble?"

"Two Hunters, this tank, three Elites, and their Grunts and Jackals," John explained as they dismantled the Wraith quickly. They didn't want it falling back into Covenant hands, so they yanked and destroyed the main engine.

"That's it?" Kelly teased.

"At once. That's when I found the children."

"Ouch!" Kelly winced sympathetically. "We had it light. Where was that luck, John?"

John shook his head. His team was happy they were losing another planet, but they had finally gotten back on the ground. It felt good.

A Pelican roared overhead and dropped quickly; a stream of Marines climbed in, some carrying wounded soldiers. John and his Spartans trooped in as well, standing in the bay and holding onto the frame above their heads. The three cameras followed, settling down on the ground beside the Spartan's boots like dogs. The Marines glanced at them warily, but Kelly explained what they were.

The pilot rose quickly, unwilling to stay on the ground, a stationary target, for any longer than necessary. They rejoined their ship swiftly, one of the last Pelicans inside.

The Spartans filed out, John limping more noticeably. The camera crew from before came to collect the little cameras, giving the Spartans thumbs up; Kate was nowhere to be found.

Once they were out of sight of the rest of the Marines, headed towards their garage, Kelly silently slung his arm over her shoulders; John huffed through the comm but didn't pull away when James did the same on the other side.

Linda opened the door to the garage and began pulling her armor off. Kelly and James set John down on his bunk it bent under the weight of him and his armor and went to take off their own armor. The ship jerked and rumbled as they entered Slipspace.

Now, the Spartans were silent. They had lost another world. Thousands, millions, of innocents were being burned even now. John and Kelly had rescued a paltry fourteen children. It didn't seem like enough.

Once Linda was out of her armor, and Kelly was nearly there, she came to help John. The "luckiest" Spartan was bruised all over, and had managed to get about half-way unarmored before his ribs ordered him not to bend over. Silently, Kelly and Linda took the armor off of his legs and set it on the rack to be cleaned. There was a large dent in his chest plate; he didn't know when that had happened.

John let Kelly examine the broken ribs and his ankle, and then assessed a nasty bruise on her back, feeling for cracked or broken ribs. Linda and James checked each other over as well.

"You should get that looked at," Kelly told John as he prodded her ribs. She hissed when he hit a sore spot. John shrugged in response to her comment.

"Come on." Kelly stood and dragged him up; Linda tossed both of them clothing and they dressed quickly. John's ankle was swollen to almost three times its normal size and he gingerly placed weight on it. He'd had worse, but Kelly was right; there was no reason to risk a bad

heal when he had access to doctors.

Dressed plainly, he doubted any crew they came across would recognize either of them. They were tall, yes, but there were many tall, tough-looking soldiers. Outside of the MJOLNIR, they were basically faceless. Just another soldier recovering from the aftermath.

Kelly swung John's arm over her shoulder again and led him towards the medical wing. They passed few people on the way and weren't bothered. The medical wing was surprisingly quiet, considering that they had just come from battle.

A nurse hurried over to them and, upon noting their height, let Kelly continue supporting John instead of offering to take him herself. Not that John needed it, but he let Kelly guide him to a room and sat on the table. It creaked quietly.

"Now, let's see here," the nurse said briskly, washing her hands in the sink. Kelly stepped to the side of the room and stood there.
"How'd you get this, big guy?"

John shrugged; he didn't really remember. "Probably lots of little things," he said quietly. She glanced up, nodded, and inspected his ankle.

"Does this hurt?" She gently prodded his ankle; John nodded. "Okay. You've torn your Achilles' tendon. I'm surprised you're still walking." He shrugged again. "And probably broken something in your ankle. We'll do a quick surgery and then you'll have to let it heal for a couple days, okay? That means no walking around."

She turned to Kelly. "Can you make sure he does that?" Kelly smirked and nodded. "Good. If you'll wait outside for a moment, then, we'll get started." Kelly obediently let herself out; John let the nurse inject a numbing agent into his ankle and then rolled onto his stomach on the table. She called in a doctor and swabbed the area to clean it as John lost feeling.

A man entered, dressed in a pristine white coat. He washed his hands and then the nurse pulled on his gloves for him and handed him tools as he carefully opened John's ankle, repaired the damage, and sewed him back up.

He left, and the nurse put John's ankle and foot in cast. They didn't have any crutches strong enough, she explained, but Kelly chuckled and said she could carry him.

"You need to lay off the potato chips," Kelly joked as she picked John up bridal style. John glared at her; she grinned. They both knew that any food other than MREs hadn't graced any soldier's stomach for a long time, unless they found a convenience store during a lull in the battle on a planet.

John hadn't eaten anything but soldier food since just after his augmentation, when he " and the other Spartans " were encouraged to eat as much as possible, including ice cream, French fries, and potato chips. It was the first time any of them had eaten anything remotely "bad" for them, not including the rare dessert treat offered as incentive to win, and they had all put on a little weight that wasn't entirely muscle. It had quickly been burned off, though, when

they began to train again.

Kelly carried John back to the garage and put him on his bunk; he fell asleep quickly as she explained to James and Linda that John wasn't to walk for a couple days while his ankle and tendon healed. They agreed to work as a team, knowing John would be up and moving as soon as he woke.

Kelly watched John from her bunk as she drifted off to sleep. He wasn't "special" in any tangible way; he wasn't the strongest, or the fastest â€“ she was, Kelly reminded herself with a smirk â€“ or the best shot. He simple was special. They called it luck, but his luck had a weird way of manifesting itself. John had run into the worst of the Covenant on Victoria, but he survived â€“ hell, he evacuated fourteen children, with her help. That softened the loss a smidgen, knowing fourteen children had survived, albeit orphans.

3. Slipspace

Disclaimer: I don't own Halo or anything about it. Except my OC(s). Because I can. _

Please do review! This is my first non-TMNT fanfiction story. Thank you to my three reviewers so far! Do note: this isn't going to be very impressive. It's more of me just finding and stretching my Halo fanfiction wings. And with that, here is the last chapter!_

**Chapter 3: **Slipspace

John woke the instant his team began moving around. He swung his leg over the bunk and eyed the cast.

"You're not supposed to be walking." Kelly wandered over, her arms showing the bruises from yesterday's fighting.

"I'm not," John pointed out, voice husky with sleep. He'd slept better than he had for a long time.

Kelly merely raised an eyebrow. "You were thinking about it."

John shrugged in defeat. "I could always work on practicing walking on one leg in case the other gets blown off."

Kelly nodded thoughtfully. "True, true. Hungry?" She was switching the topic, but John felt his stomach remind him that he had just gone through a lot on a little food. Spartan metabolisms wereâ€œ fast.

"Yeah. What are our options?"

"I can carry you into the mess hall or we could order in." Because the Spartans were supposed to keep their human side as covert as possible â€“ not knowing if a green demon was human helped maintain the myth that Spartans never died, only went MIA â€“ they were usually allowed to order food be brought to them, like patients in the hospital. It was something they usually did, not enjoying the glares and occasionally barb from the soldiers.

"Let's order in. And I'll challenge you to a game of chess while we wait."

Kelly nodded and went to the communications unit near the door, ordered four Spartan meals â€“ the kitchen staff knew to bring enough to feed eight or ten people â€“ and brought the chess set from the closet over. The Spartans always kept something on hand to entertain themselves in case of injury, and for this ride, Admiral Hood had presented them with a fairly amusing chess set.

John chose to be the Covenant and set up his Grunt pawns, Jackal knights and rooks, and Elite bishops. Hunters completed the set as king and queen. He wondered briefly why Prophets were missing, not to mention Engineers and Brutes, but then realized that few people had encountered any of those particular species. Kelly set up her UNSC side, the king and queen being Spartans.

They played quickly; the game was not an accurate representation of the war because Kelly won. Her queen Spartan took the king Hunter while her bishops and single knight â€“ ODSTs â€“ kept him fenced in. She had left her king under the guard of a troop of pawns, Marines. John had captured her rooks, the ONI technicians, quickly.

Just then, their food arrived. James rolled the trolley in from the corridor and parked it in front of John. They ate in comfortable silence; anyone who could have watched would have said they were eating and leaving, but it was just habit.

They polished off the trolley and Linda put it back in the corridor for someone to find and take back to the kitchen. John watched as referee as Linda, Kelly, and James sparred in various combinations. Kelly would take on James and Linda, and then Linda and Kelly would attack James. It was fast-paced and John made mental notes the entire time.

He could already predict what each of his Spartans would do. James loved to tackle Kelly to the ground, since she couldn't use her speed then â€“ and Kelly enjoyed rolling around on the ground like a pair of kids again. Linda would let them have their fun and, depending on her team, wait until her teammate was on bottom, and yank the aggressor off them. If James and Kelly were on a team, Kelly would distract Linda until James could come up behind and force her to her knees.

They played several bouts before they were interrupted. Once again, Kate just walked in â€“ and stopped dead.

Kelly was laughing, trying to cry mercy but unable to as James tickled her; Linda was holding Kelly's legs down, sitting on her calves, while James sat on her chest and used his knees and feet to keep her arms down. Kelly was very ticklish, and they used that to their advantage.

The trio looked up, as did John, and instantly went from happy-go-lucky children to serious Spartan soldiers. Kate blinked at the transformation; Linda and James rose and Kelly sprang to her feet. John did not stand, and she quickly noticed why as his ankle's cast came into view.

Kate cleared her throat. It felt like she had interrupted and

witnessed some sort of secret ritual. The Spartans were calm and collected as they faced her. Kelly offered John a hand and he rose, balancing easily on his uninjured foot.

"Ma'am," he greeted, tilting his head. "Can we help you?"

Kate breathed in to calm herself and nodded. "I have the video from yesterday and thought you might enjoy seeing it before we send it to news stations for distribution."

John nodded and, without seeming to give a signal, the Spartans joined her by the door, waiting for her to lead the way. She didn't miss a warning glare from John to Kelly, however, when the woman began to bend over, probably to pick him up, though she looked dainty compared to him.

Kelly huffed almost silently, glaring at John, and slung moved under his injured side. *Damn men and their pride*, Kelly thought to herself as she and John made their way out of the garage. It was an awkward position but Kelly knew they made it look effortless, like everything else.

"It's just down here." Kate led them to an auditorium, empty save for the film crew. They waved in greeting to the Spartans as the large men and women took their seats. Kelly deposited John in the front row, where he liked to sit, and sat next to him. James sat on his other side and Linda occupied Kelly's free side.

"This is what we're planning to send out to raise morale and, hopefully, get more soldiers to sign up. We're seeing too many losses," Kate began. A screen fell from the ceiling, bouncing once before it straightened.

John watched intently. It opened with the seal of the UNSC and a gloomy song. The insignia faded and went to the aftermath of a battle. John recognized the still shots he and the Spartans had made in the room onboard the ship. It looked real, though; buildings burned in the distance and the dead Marines and ODSTs littering the ground looked like they were starting to decay. The gloomy song turned slowly into something of an anthem, as if mourning the lost soldiers.

They switched to live action slowly, watching soldiers collapse in battle. Then, suddenly, a cymbal crash and the tune changed to lively. It made John think of a charge of horses as the booming bass drums rumbled. He noticed why instantly; two Spartans charged on scene. The cameras zoomed in on one faceplate and John recognized Kelly for an instant.

There was an Elite roar, which made all of the Spartans nervous instantly. It had sounded *very* real. But they noticed right away what it was; a computer-generated Elite - not that anyone who hadn't been on the film would know - charged into the camera's view. John watched himself on the screen prime a grenade - it had been fake, but looked real enough - and toss it. It stuck to the Elite and the tall alien screamed in surprise, warbling in distress as it clawed at the grenade stuck to its armor. It detonated and the scene faded into an even more recognizable district.

The camera followed John from behind as he crept around a corner on

Victoria. John held his breath, knowing what came next. To the camera, he froze " an Elite bellowed and he sprang forward. He was out of the camera for a second before it caught up to find him emptying his rifle " it roared unrealistically " into the Elite. It brandished an energy sword and leapt for him, but the rifle brought it down and it died with a warble.

The other two Elites charged and the camera followed them. John shot one with his pistol several times and it died with a round through its skull, but John was already moving as the other one reached him and tried to bash at his head with its plasma pistol. They locked together in hand-to-hand, John seemingly not so scary when faced with a taller opponent. They grappled and the camera swung " which showed John what he had missed as he and Elite went toe-to-toe. The Hunters had watched for a moment and, upon realizing he would probably kill this final Elite, raised their fuel rod guns to fire upon the pair.

John saw that the only thing that had saved him from being skewered by fuel rod plasma was that he had luckily moved so that the Elite " and its shields " was between him and the Hunters. They flew through the air, still holding onto each other, when the Hunters shot at them. John watched himself roll until he was sitting on the Elite and punch his hand through its head " the camera zooming in on the blow.

He moved, and the camera whirred desperately as it tried to follow. It missed the flash of plasma that had vaporized the Elite, trying to track John as the Spartan paused, facing off the force.

The music changed slightly to something ominous as the camera zoomed on his faceplate. John imagined anyone watching would think he was smirking behind his visor, like the Hunters, Wraith, and everything else was nothing too special.

The camera panned back out just as John was thrown through the air by a Hunter shot, into a store. It watched as he jumped back out and tossed the two grenades, and then lost him as it followed the grenades into the Grunts. They blew up, splattering the streets with their bluish blood. One of the Hunters charged and the camera followed it as it ran for the alleyway John had ducked into.

Two grenades came soaring out and John realized that he had hit the Hunter about to sneak up on him; that was why the grenade had bounced back. The camera tracked him as he rolled away from the grenade and then jumped at the Hunter. The camera froze for a moment, rotating the scene so it was quite clear that John was actually attacking the Hunter. Then it snapped back into motion and showed John coming up under the gun, punching the Hunter, and ducking around it.

The Hunter detonated, splashing the camera " which had gotten a little too close " with its orange blood. Something wiped across the screen and John realized the technicians had anticipated such an occurrence and built in miniature lens wipers.

It focused back on him as he engaged the Hunter, using his rifle this time. There was a thunderous roar " John realized they had gotten someone to yell and had deepened it to sound like it was the Spartan yelling " as he dove forward, attacking his Hunter hand-to-hand as he had the last one. It followed as he shot it with his pistol and it

teetered for a moment before crashing to the ground.

The image got a little fuzzy as plasma detonated nearby; it showed John swerving out of the way of the Wraith's plasma mortar and then leap onto the tank and pull the hatch off without seeming to pound at it. He shot into the interior and then there was silence; the background music stopped.

John slid off the tank as whirled, facing something off-screen. The camera followed his movement to find the children coming from the store. Now the music was soft, endearing, and almost lulling. The children walked up to the Spartan. Someone had obviously done some voice editing because John didn't sound nearly so gruff as he spoke to the younglings. They also cut the baby from the video.

They cut almost immediately to seeing Kelly getting piled upon by children. The camera followed them through the streets, making sure to get close-ups of each child's face. They loaded up onto the Pelican and the music was triumphant. Some thoughtful technician had edited out the children calling out the Spartan's names; instead, several children's voices yelled, "Thank you!"

The scene faded as the Spartans moved away and the Pelican rose. Words appeared in the black.

They are here to protectâ€| There was a shot of Kelly hunched over the children, John looking out as though guarding the children. _They are here to winâ€|_ James was battling hand-to-hand with an Elite in this shot; it snarled at him, both frozen in mid-air. _They are here for humanityâ€| The Spartans â€“ three of them â€“ were lined up, seeming to look off into the distance, with smart salutes in their green armor. Kate had shot this still in the studio, John remembered. _They are Spartans._ There was a line-up of several Spartans in MJOLNIR armor; John recognized all of his teammates and his heart thudded in his chest. This picture had been taken before he had lost any of his comrades to the mythical MIA list; they had been about to go on their first mission and Dr. Halsey had insisted on this picture. They were saluting smartly, facing the camera this time.

The seal of the UNCS played again; this time, there were a pair of Spartans, facing slightly to the side as though on the lookout for attackers, on either side.

John didn't like it. He and his team didn't want special recognition. This film had completely disregarded the hundreds of dead Marines and ODSTs and pilots that had made it possible for them to make it to the surface and back. In fact, it portrayed them as weak, as though the Spartans were the only force able to stand up to the Covenant.

He could tell that Kelly and James felt the same; they were sitting stiffly, glaring holes into the seal still on the screen. John glanced at Linda and noticed she, too, was unhappy with the result.

"What do you think?" Kate beamed, bouncing back to the podium. John glanced at his teammates; they nodded to him.

He stood, saluted, and said, "We do not appreciate it."

Kate blinked, her mouth opening and closing for a moment. "Why?" she sputtered.

John shook his head slightly. "It portrays us as humanity's last hope. We are merely soldiers during our duty. There are hundreds of troops dead on Victoria, but you have portrayed us as being invincible. We aren't." John motioned to his leg. "The more human soldiers deserve much more applause than we."

Kate blinked at him, glanced to the side of the auditorium, and then back. John followed her gaze and saw Admiral Hood leaning against the door, smirking. John instantly straightened to attention; his Spartans rose fluidly and snapped salutes in unison. "Sir!"

"At ease, Spartans." They relaxed. "Master Chief." John straightened a tad. "I am glad you pointed that out. I agree with you â€“ but Mrs. Ublood has the final word." All five soldiers â€“ Admiral and Spartan alike â€“ turned to look at the woman who gaped like a fish out of water.

"Wellâ€œ! I s-suppose we could do something with the little footage of the regular troops we haveâ€œ!"

"See to it," Admiral Hood ordered. "Spartans, if you would follow me." The Admiral marched out of the door; the Spartans quickly caught up, Kelly making sure John didn't rest any weight on his ankle.

"I appreciate your support, Master Chief." Admiral Hood didn't seem fazed to be speaking to someone who towered over him. "You have our thanks for evacuating those children as well. They are safely on Earth now."

Kelly answered before John could, and there was audible relief in her voice. "Thank you, sir. We are glad."

"We will be in Slipspace for at least another week. You may want to go into cryo." It was a delicate hint, but John took it immediately.

"We will, sir, as soon as the doctors get this cast off me," John allowed. They always went into cryo in their suits in case they had to be rapidly unfrozen for battle. It saved quite a few minutes of preparation, though they woke with frost burn.

"Very good, s-â€œ! Spartan." The Admiral cleared his throat. "I hope you recover quickly."

"We're making sure he obeys the doctor," Kelly told the Admiral with a small grin. Admiral Hood smiled slightly and dismissed them; they trooped back to their garage.

John sat on his bunk and noticed the dip in the solid steel from when he had sat down in his armor just after the battle. It wasn't too bad, perhaps five degrees, but it would be a pain for someone to fix.

The Spartans spoke quietly for a few hours, comparing battles on Victoria before the topic swung to memories of their training. They had little else to do while they waited for John to be pronounced well enough to walk again. John tried to talk them into going into

cryo without him, but they responded that he would surely hurt himself if they weren't there to watch out for him.

That instigated a discussion of who was the worst when it came to obeying doctors " and John lost that argument. Kelly and Linda pointed out that he had tried to go back into battle with a cracked vertebra and ended up immobilized for a week while doctors repaired the damage. James recounted the time when John had snapped his tibia and ignored the doctor's warnings not to go into cryo; they had had to re-break it when he thawed out in order to straighten it.

John surrendered under the assault and suggested they go to the gym. Each Spartan was eager for something other than talking. It wasn't something they did often, as they rarely got to see their fellows anymore. John knew James and Linda would be sent off as soon as they left Slipspace, probably to another ship each. Kelly wasn't reassigned just yet.

James took care to make sure John didn't put weight on his ankle this time; Kelly kept glancing at them to make sure. They got to the garage quickly and found it mostly empty. They immediately went to the highest gravity section, closest to the spinning core that generated their artificial gravity on the ship.

James deposited John on the bench press and loaded it with four hundred pounds " a good starting weight. John pressed several sets, James hovering just in case he needed help. Kelly went to the punching bag and let loose; it split upon the fifth punch.

"They make these things more delicate every year," Kelly muttered in disgust as she went to find a broom.

Linda was working on the dumbbells in her own little world; John noticed she had taken to staring off into space regularly, and it was becoming more frequent.

A troop of Marines came in, laughing and punching at each other. They spotted the Spartans working out " one whistled appreciatively as they added up the weights Linda was crunching and John was pressing.

John ignored them; they didn't usually bother each other, the Marines and Spartans. However, this time, there seemed to be something the Marines wanted, because they approached John as a flock. James alerted him to the approaching group silently; John placed the bar back on its stand and sat up, finding the Marines gathered around the end of the bench like a group of kids.

"You have to be the Spartans. No one else uses this area. Are you the Master Chief?" one of them asked.

"Yes," John answered. The Marines saluted; John returned it without standing, but they didn't mind, probably seeing the cast on his ankle.

"I'm Private Tolero," the Marine who spoke said, introducing himself. "You guys saved my ass on Victoria. I just wanted to thank you."

John nodded, looking closely at the Marine. "You were the one with

the hole in your side."

"Yes, sir," he chuckled. "A Grunt hit me."

"Petty Officer Spartan-087 was responsible for carrying you out, Private," John told him. Kelly heard her name â€“ or Spartan designation, at least - and walked over, broom and dust pan in hand.

"Sir?" Kelly asked, looking at the Marines.

Private Tolero extended his hand. "I was the sorry sot you carried out at the beginning of the battle," he explained. Kelly shook his hand gingerly, aware that she could easily break it without realizing it.

"I'm glad you're all patched up," Kelly told him. He nodded and saluted again; the Spartans returned it quickly. The Marines moved back into the normal gravity area and began working out. John lay back down and pressed the weights thoughtfully.

There was another commotion; a strutting group of ODSTs wandered in, lazily talking amongst themselves. They spotted the Marines and waved; then they spotted the Spartans. John sensed trouble immediately.

Sure enough, the ODSTs marched over and John was forced to put his weights up to speak to them.

"I'm guessing you're the freaks." The ODST who spoke was sneering slightly; John was used to it, but he felt the tension in the room rise immediately. Kelly, James, and Linda, all having heard the comment, stopped what they were doing, turning to the group of ODSTs. The Marines paused, not having heard but feeling the tension in the air.

"We are the Spartans," John allowed in a low voice.

The ODST waved the technicality away. "Whatever. I suppose you're right proud of yourselves, rescuing those kiddies."

Kelly stiffened; John shot her a warning look and turned back to the mouthy ODST.

"We are glad that fourteen more futures were saved," he said carefully. He wasn't in the mood for any confrontation. "No matter who did it."

"You think you're all that and shit," another ODST sneered, growling. "You'd be nothing without your armor and freakiness."

John shrugged. "You are welcome to believe that." He didn't know if these ODSTs were ranked above him â€“ they were in fatigues â€“ so he kept his voice civil and calm.

Kelly was fuming, he knew. James was probably watching the scene calmly, and Linda was ignoring them.

"You don't even have names," another ODST smirked. His buddies grinned and sneered. "You're just disposable soldiers to throw at the

Covenant. And if you die, oh well, there's another one down."

Kelly took a step forward; John shook his head at her, locking eyes for a moment. Kelly's frustration showed plainly to him, though he knew no one but a Spartan or Dr. Halsey could read it. He warned her with a look only she could read and she stepped back again, though it was hesitant.

John turned back to the ODSTs. "Our names are not important. We are all fighting for the same cause, and we do not die." Technically, we just go missing, John reminded himself with an internal sigh. It felt like betraying his brothers and sister who had actually died.

"Bullshit," an ODST laughed. "I watched one of you freaks get torn in half by a Brute. There's no way anything could survive that, robot or not."

John quickly thought back; he frowned. He hadn't been given many details of his fellow Spartans' deaths. While he was thinking, he saw a blur; his mind registered Kelly attacking the ODSTs. "Stand down!" he barked. It was too late; the ODST who had insulted their comrade was down, arm broken in two places. Kelly stood next to him, breathing normally as though she hadn't just attacked the man.

The ODST realized he was hurt and yelled in pain, holding his arm carefully. The other ODSTs stared for a moment and then registered that a Spartan had attacked; they turned towards the aggressor.

"Bitch!" They swarmed to attack; James and Linda waded in with Kelly. John sat on his bench and watched; he knew his Spartans could handle themselves. With quick taps and nerve-attacks, each ODST was knocked to their asses by a Spartan. It over in a matter of seconds. The Marines, who had run over to interfere, stopped and watched.

"Now." John let his voice deepen in anger; James, Linda, and Kelly stood behind him as he rose, carefully not resting weight on his bad ankle. The ODSTs stared at him, dazed. "We will forget this attack on our comrade. Next time you pick a fight, I suggest remembering that we freaks can easily crush you." Mostly, John was sad â€“ he didn't like remembering that most of those MIAs on his list of teammates were actually KIAs. But he was also angry, that a soldier could attack another soldier so viciously.

"I suggest you take your comrade to the medical bay," he continued, nodding to the ODST with the broken arm. Said man had collapsed and fainted, probably from the pain. The ODSTs slowly got up, weaving with dizziness; the Marines helped them, though it was clear they didn't want to. The Spartans had become so used to fighting the tougher Covenant that they had probably caused some damage to the humans.

They gathered their fallen comrade and hustled out, muttering amongst themselves. John sat back down and went back to pressing the weights like nothing had happened; Linda and James drifted away, sensing that Kelly wanted to talk to him.

"John, how can you just let them do that?" Kelly muttered, standing over him. John looked up and met her eyes, pausing with the weights

just over his chest.

"They don't know any better," he answered quietly. "We aren't approachable, Kelly. We're not supposed to be. They're jealous that we took their spot as the stars of the UNSC."

"Still," she huffed. "They have no reason to attack us!" Or any of our comrades."

John agreed silently. "Attacking them did no one any good," he reprimanded.

Kelly smirked dangerously. "It needed to be done."

"You put another soldier out of commission. What if we are called to battle again?" John reminded her.

"Then he can be safely in the med bay." Kelly wasn't budging; she was stubborn that way.

"We're not children, Kelly. We can afford to let them insult us and not react. Remember, we have no dignity for their insults to shred," he reminded her with a small smirk. Kelly grinned more openly in response.

"I've seen you look at yourself in the mirror," she teased. "You have enough vanity for all of us."

John rolled his eyes and went back to pressing the weights silently.

"You can't refute my argument 'cause you know I'm right," Kelly snickered as she leaned against the wall, watching him.

"Keeping myself clean-shaven is not vanity," he finally said. "You might want to try it."

Kelly blinked in surprise; it was rare that John ever-serious stick-in-the-mud John cracked a joke. She peered at him. "Why are you in a good mood?"

John shrugged. "Be a good Spartan and load fifty more pounds on here," he ordered, putting the bar back on its support. She did so quickly and he resumed pressing the weights.

Kelly watched John carefully. He wasn't very emotional; he faced everything stoically, so far as she knew. She could remember each and every joke he had ever told, rare as they were. She, on the other hand, knew that to suppress her emotions meant slowing herself down. Maybe it was just how John was.

Kelly also knew that John blamed himself for a lot of things out of his control, especially the deaths of their fellow Spartans.

"It isn't your fault they died," she murmured. John paused momentarily and then resumed his workout without responding. Kelly tried again. "Come on, John. You can't protect us, and we're not some slack-jawed Helljumper."

"I send them on missions and they die, Kelly. And we can't even let

them die," he reminded her. "They have to be MIA."

"When I die, I don't want to be mourned," she said. John glanced at her. "I want people to think, 'That Kelly; she was a Spartan. She was amazing and faster than anyone who ever lived.' Not, 'Spartan-087 has gone out of commission' or 'Spartan-087 is missing but presumed alive.'"

"Having a mid-life crisis?" James asked, joining them. Linda drifted over.

"Something like that," Kelly huffed. She scowled at the floor.

They all caught the sound of the door to the gym opening and John sat up to see who was coming in now. He stood immediately, saluting as the Admiral walked over to them. Kelly straightened and did the same; James and Linda snapped to attention and saluted.

"Which one of you broke the Helljumper's arm?" Admiral Hood asked, not giving them permission to stand at ease.

Kelly stepped forward and renewed her salute. "I did, sir."

The officer watched her, obviously waiting for more. An apology or explanation, John guessed. But Kelly was silent.

"And why did you do it?" he finally asked.

"Sir, the ODST was insulting my comrades."

John nearly smacked Kelly upside the head; she didn't sound contrite at all.

"I see." The Admiral's voice was monotone. "Master Chief."

John stepped forward. "Sir?"

"Take your team into cryo. I don't need more repeats of this incident." Admiral Hood turned to Kelly. "You are lucky that I am not court-martialing you, Spartan-087."

"Yes, sir," Kelly said. John caught the growl in her voice, but the Admiral didn't. He dismissed them; John led the way out, waving James off when the other Spartan tried to keep him from walking on his injured ankle. It had been almost two days, after all. Maybe. Internal clocks were useless in Slipspace.

"Prepare for cryo," he ordered his team. They glanced at him, saluted, and peeled off for the garage. He headed for the medical bay where the doctor removed his cast.

He then returned to the garage to find his Spartans dressed in their armor already. John hurried into his, sealed his helmet, and led the way to the cryo bay. The technicians there were obviously expecting them; they already had four tubes ready to accept them. John lay in his and watched as the clear cover slowly closed over him. He opened his helmet's vents to let the gases in that would put him into a deep sleep.

His last image was of Kelly, telling him that she didn't want to be

mourned. Her eyes had been misty when she had told him, and he knew it was on every Spartan's mind. They had served all their life, and now, they couldn't even take a break when they died. It seemed unfair, John knew, but he also understood that the illusion helped the troops believe that they might just win the war.

He was proud of his Spartans; they served even after death, something few others could claim. And while they lived, they were symbols of hope and power. Every child on the unglassed colonies idolized the Spartans, he had been told; plastic MJOLNIR armor made in all sizes flew off the shelves and helped fund the war effort. Surgical alterations to increase one's height were all the rage for those who could afford it. John was content with his lot in life. He would fight until his luck ran out, and then he would serve again.

End
file.